

“PARANORMAL ACTIVITY 3” (Film Review)

Written by Michael Gingold

Friday, 21 October 2011 09:32



In following up the found-footage horror hit of 2009, *PARANORMAL ACTIVITY 2* constructed a clever plot that took place before, during and after its predecessor, but often took the point of view out of the place where the terror was most primal. *PARANORMAL ACTIVITY 3* has a much more prosaic storyline, but it does, if you'll pardon the phrase, put the camera back in the bedroom where it belongs.

The prologue to the latest sequel does fill in a couple of gaps from 2, reintroducing us to sisters Katie and Kristi (returning Katie Featherston and Sprague Grayden) and dropping a bit of explanation for a key moment in the previous movie. After that, the rest of 3 takes place in 1988, when Katie and Kristi are preteens (played by naturalistic little actresses Chloe Csengery and Jessica Brown) living with their mother Julie (Lauren Bittner) and stepdad Dennis (Chris Smith) in a house laid out remarkably similar to Kristi's future home. We see a lot of it through the camera wielded by Dennis, a wedding videographer with a penchant for capturing everything in his life on tape, which helps explain why, as the film goes on, he keeps shooting long after most other people would have.



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If you wanted to get all analytical, you could surmise that growing up with a man with such a taping obsession might help explain why the adult Katie took up with the similarly inclined Micah. *PARANORMAL ACTIVITY 3* isn't concerned with such reasonings, nor should it be, but in any case the upshot is the same: Dennis responds to early signs of P-activity by setting up cameras all over the house in hopes of capturing hard visual evidence. Thus there are numerous long stationary takes of Dennis and Julie, and Katie and Kristi, asleep in their beds in dim light, building up tension by showing nothing and exploiting the age-old fear the original *PARANORMAL* preyed on so well—the sense of something invading our vulnerable space while we slumber.

Directors Henry Joost and Ariel Schulman, previously suspected of staging their documentary breakout *CATFISH*, here demonstrate that they can indeed present authentic-looking scenarios in a realistic context. They also adapt well to this franchise's particular pacing, holding the shots just long enough before sneaking something spooky into a corner, or goosing the audience with a sudden movement or loud noise. There are a few more fake scares of people suddenly and jokingly lunging at the lens than in the earlier movies, but screenwriter Christopher Landon (also one of *PARANORMAL 2*'s three scribes) makes them a function of the time period; back in the late '80s, people weren't as used to having cameras pointed at them, and were more likely to play to them in such a manner.

The filmmakers also introduce a new visual conceit to the franchise to prove one of its most effective: tinkerer Dennis mounts one camera on an oscillating fan that pans slowly back and forth between the kitchen and the living room, while the audience waits with creeping dread to see what the inexorably moving point of view will reveal. A couple of the best gags are captured by this device, one of them a simple twist on traditional ghost imagery and the other a variation on a memorable moment from *POLTERGEIST*.

The focus on frightened little girls also recalls the Steven Spielberg/Tobe Hooper classic, though here the malefactor seems to reside in Katie and Kristi's bedroom closet rather than in a TV. Little Kristi is the first to sense the presence, treating him like an imaginary friend she calls Toby. We never see Toby (beyond a nifty moment where his form is suggested), but he certainly makes himself known in increasingly violent and scary ways. His tricks are often familiar from the prior *PARANORMALS*, and indeed the inevitable sense of repetition is the latest installment's greatest liability. There are only so many scare tactics that can be worked from this formula without betraying it, and there are points when, for example, Katie crawls into that open closet, and one counts the seconds before the door slams closed on its own.

There's also the inevitable question of why the family stays so long in a house that's clearly

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haunted. At first, Julie finds the idea of nasty spirits about as believable as the reality of Kristi’s imaginary playmate, but she maintains a rather unreasonable denial even after they’ve gotten in her face. (The fact of Dennis’ video evidence is unpersuasively gotten around by having her simply, stubbornly refuse to watch it.) And considering what happens to poor Katie once the movie’s second half kicks in, it’s hard to accept that the girl wouldn’t insist on at least going to stay at a friend’s house, if not in another state.

Yet the basic, scary appeal of the PARANORMAL pictures remains solid in this entry, and anyone who enjoyed the first and second movies enough to come to this one will get their money’s worth. It’s not giving anything away to note that 3 ends with the door open for a fourth picture, though a movie taking off from a hint dropped in that opening scene might be even more intriguing. It would also answer a question that has run through the background of the whole series: Who’s been assembling and editing all this footage?

